

Return to Camp Kazi

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Author: ThatPersonYouMightKnow

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Summary: The cubs return to Camp Kazi. But it's quite different from last time...

***Chapter 1*: Chapter 1: Welcome to the Camp**

AN: And so we come to the last normal story of this series. I'm going to try to make it a lot more fun than the others, since the three-part finale is coming up after this, and I know all of you will be in that dramatic mood. This'll be a nice little break from the depression.

Return to Camp Kazi

Chapter One: Welcome to the Camp

Kambi really hated his mother.

Ever since she had arrived in the den with the brilliant news that she had enrolled him at Camp Kazi, he despised her. "I'll be great," she said. "You'll make loads of friends," she told him.

Well, he didn't care about making more friends. He had plenty back home, but that clearly wasn't good enough for his mother. She clearly wanted him to make friends with every animal on earth. She claimed that he wasn't "active" enough and that he needed more "exercise" in order to achieve a "better life". He thought that his life was good enough already. He didn't need a stupid to camp to teach him anything!

He'd never even heard of Camp Kazi, anyway. Apparently, rumours had been spreading throughout the pride that the camp was closed down quite a while ago, due to some sort of tragic accident involving one of the counsellors. It had recently been reopened, though, and all cubs were invited to enjoy "a whole summer of fun" there. His mother had obviously been suckered in by the thought of not having to look after her son for a whole season...

Kambi hadn't been suckered in, though. Not for a second. He wanted to stay home, but his mother forced him to attend the camp, despite his protests. She dumped him in the middle of nowhere: a desert full of dirt that stretched on for miles and miles and miles. The only point of any interest was that the seemingly endless area was filled with hundreds upon thousands of holes...

At first, he didn't understand what the holes meant. He assumed that was just the natural appearance of this odd location. An old remnant of some great civilisation from thousands of years ago. But he didn't know what was really going on. He didn't realise what the holes were for. He didn't know why more cubs were needed. He didn't know what the camp's true purpose was.

And its purpose was one of evil.

Kambi rolled his eyes as he sat in the centre of the circle of cubs, frowning at how bored he felt. *I really hate you, Mom*, he thought, rolling his eyes.

It was his first day at Camp Kazi. The campers—consisting entirely of cubs—were sat in a circle on the ground. Facing Kambi was a lion. It was the camp counsellor, and his name was Shauri. He was a very odd lion, who seemed to speak in a voice that made him sound as though he was a great distance away from all the rest of them.

"So, uh, hey, little dudes," Shauri said, laughing as he finished his sentence. "Welcome to Camp Kazi. You're all here to, like, learn and stuff."

"Learn?" exclaimed Kambi. "We were told this was going to be 'a whole summer of fun'. I *knew* this was all a big lie!" He ignored all of the weird looks the other cubs were giving him. He didn't care what they thought...

"Whoa," said Shauri. "Calm down, little dude. It's gonna be *totally* fun! You're gonna have the most radical time of your lives! We can learn *and* have fun at, like, the same time! That's so far out!"

This guy is crazy, Kambi thought, and found himself hating his mother even more for bringing him here. *I have to spend six weeks with this idiot? He doesn't even know which way is up and which way is down! I've gotta get out of here...*

"So, what are we gonna be doing first?" one cub asked. Kambi could tell that he was the type of cub who was actually looking forward to this camp. They were complete polar opposites. Kambi couldn't wait to get out of this awful place...

"The first order of business, little dudes," Shauri announced, rising to his paws and sticking a claw in the air, "is to test your strength ability."

"Our strength ability?" Kambi said. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you're gonna dig a hole," Shauri told them, much to Kambi's surprise.

"Dig... a... hole?" Kambi said slowly, unable to believe what he was hearing.

He could tell that there were two things wrong with this camp already. One: digging a hole wasn't fun. And two: digging a hole wasn't educational. So, that made Shauri's statement from earlier completely null and void. Digging a hole was a pointless exercise. Unless you were digging someone's grave, why else would you do it?

"Yeah, little dude," said Shauri. "It, like, builds character—and stuff. It'll show us your strength so we can assign you the perfect job."

"But we're cubs," Kambi protested. All eyes were on him as he argued with the counsellor. He couldn't exactly blame them; it wasn't like there was anything else interesting to hear or see in this pathetic excuse for a camp. "We don't need jobs. Digging a hole isn't fun, and it doesn't teach us anything."

"Yo, little dude," Shauri laughed. "Chill. Digging holes is all part of the fun. The fun of... *digging*, right, guys?"

The other cubs all glanced at each other, and shrugged. They didn't really know how to respond properly to his question. In fact, they found quite hard to respond to *anything* that Shauri said.

"See?" Shauri looked at Kambi. "They love it here. There's no better place on earth than Camp Kazi!"

"I beg to differ," Kambi muttered under his breath. To him, Camp Kazi was one of the *worst* places on earth. It seemed utterly pointless. He was going to spend weeks and weeks completing the most boring tasks ever invented...

"Now, little dudes, you can all find a spot and start digging," he told them, as the cubs began to rise from their sitting positions. "Every hole has gotta be five feet deep and five feet wide. That way you're gonna make the best out of each one you dig."

I bet this guy doesn't even have a brain, Kambi thought as the cubs dispersed in every direction, looking for a decent spot to start digging their holes. *And now I have to dig a hole. To 'test my strength', or whatever the heck that means. This place is for losers...*

Kambi grunted as he dug his claws into a random spot, and started pulling up dirt. Within five minutes, he had a sizeable pile of soil to his left side. It was going to take quite a while before he had a hole that was five feet wide and five feet deep...

"Stupid work," he grumbled. "Stupid holes. Stupid camp. Stupid, stupid, stupid..."

Words could not describe how much he hated it there. As the hours droned on, and his hole became deeper, he wished that he could be anywhere other than stuck in this dreaded place. He could feel his brain slowly starting to melt at the monotony of his task. He'd never felt so miserable before...

"Hey, little dude." Kambi was annoyed to see Shauri wandering over to the side of his hole as he continued to dig it. "That's a really great hole you've got going on down there."

"What do you want?" Kambi groaned, tired of his presence already. He'd never met such an annoying—and incredibly stupid—animal before in his life! Why couldn't he just leave him alone to get on with his mind-numbingly tedious work? "I'm trying to dig."

Shauri chuckled. "I'm sure you'll make a very great camper, little dude," he said. "None of the others can dig a hole as fast as you."

Kambi was slightly surprised by the compliment. "Your point being...?"

"I just wanted to say, that's all," the counsellor said. He started to walk away, but turned around, as if remembering something. "Oh, and there is just *one* more thing."

Kambi dumped another mound of dirt on top of his pile. "What?" he asked, looking up at Shauri.

"I want you to take a look at something," the counsellor told him. "Something magical and full of wonder."

Kambi watched as Shauri held something up in front of his face. "What the heck is that?" he demanded. "It looks like a diamond—"

He stopped as he slowly began to appreciate the beauty of the diamond that Shauri was holding. It was so... pretty. And so... shiny. In fact, he could think about nothing else. In just a matter of seconds, its power had entirely consumed his mind.

"Pretty, pretty. Shiny, shiny," Kambi said, a goofy smile on his face and red spirals in his eyes.

Shauri smiled evilly. "Now, little dude," he snarled, "you're going to obey my every command. Is that clear?"

"Yes, master," Kambi replied in a zombie-like tone.

"Good." Shauri was satisfied. "Now, I want you never to argue with me ever again. I want you to forget all about your old life. All you know now is that I am your master. Do you understand?"

"Yes, master," Kambi obeyed. "You are all that matters."

"Excellent. Now, keep digging."

"Yes... dig... dig... dig..." Kambi said, as he began to dig as fast as he possibly could.

Shauri quickly buried the diamond underneath the dirt, and then walked off, laughing evilly as he left Kambi to do his work.

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2: The Return**

Chapter Two: The Return

"I don't believe it," Nala said, shaking her head and forcing back tears. "This is awful."

Simba finished filling the grave with dirt, and stood up to face her. "That should do it," he said, brushing soil from his chest. "I don't think anyone would be dumb enough to dig this deep. Guess that work at Camp Kazi helped with my digging skills."

The two cubs stood at the edge of the grave, staring at the dirt that had been piled on top. A singular, small flower was sticking out of the soil. It represented the death of one of their closest friends.

This was Tama's grave.

Nala had a solemn expression on her face. "Tama's dead... Haiba's disappeared... Who's going to be next, Simba? It's like we're all dying, one at a time. It could be me next. Or *you*..."

Simba sighed, turning away from the grave. "I don't know what's happening, Nala," he told her honestly. "I thought we were on to something... but now I'm not so sure. Especially now that this has happened."

"I just don't understand it," Nala said. "Who would want to kill Tama? Her head was just... smashed in. Whoever it was, they were a monster. And they took Haiba. That just makes it worse. What would they want with him?"

"I was thinking the same thing," Simba admitted, narrowing his eyes in thought. "Whoever murdered Tama obviously wanted to make a point to us. To show that they were dangerous, and that they're deadly. Then they took Haiba hostage, because they want something from us."

"But I don't understand," said Nala, bemused. "We don't have anything. Just this resort. What could we possibly give them?"

"Could be anything," Simba replied with a shrug. "Aibu wanted the resort. Maybe someone else wants it, too. Or maybe they want one of us. For information. They might want to trade Haiba for me, or you."

"First Tojo, then Tama," Nala said, putting a paw to her forehead. "I don't know where it's going to end, Simba." She looked around, feeling every so slightly paranoid. "Maybe we should get out of here."

"What?" Simba looked at her like she was insane. "Why would you want to leave?"

"Because everything goes wrong here," Nala said, moving closer to him. "And you know it does. Maybe it's all because of this resort. It might be cursed."

"Don't be so stupid," Simba said, laughing at the thought. "If this place was cursed, then we'd all be dead already! Besides, Tama wasn't killed in the resort. She was killed just outside. There's nothing going on, Nala. Stop being so afraid of things that aren't going to happen."

"Well, I can't think of any other reasons," Nala responded. "And there are hardly any of us left now. Just me, you, my mom and Zazu. Well, and Ugaidi—but he's hardly here half of the time. He's always so terrified that he spends the whole day hiding in a bush or something."

"You need to stop freaking out," Simba told her. "We're the ones who are in control around here. We're not in danger. We are the danger."

"Doesn't look like it from where I'm standing," Nala retorted. "Give it a week and we'll *all* be dead!"

"Nala, just—"

"Hey, guys!"

Their argument was interrupted by a very familiar voice.

Slowly, Simba and Nala turned their heads to the side, and saw Haiba striding towards them. He had that familiar warm, friendly smile on his face. He looked happier than ever, all things considered.

"Haiba?" they both exclaimed, stunned by his reappearance.

"That's me," Haiba grinned, stopping right in front of them. "Why the long faces?"

"We thought you were gone for ever," Nala confessed. "Just what the heck happened out there? Who kidnapped you?"

"*Kidnapped* me?" said Haiba, confused.

"Yeah," Simba said, and begun to fill him in on recent events. "Tama's dead. We found her on the outskirts. Someone smashed her head in with a rock. And then you disappeared. Who took you?"

Haiba frowned for a second, glaring at the two. The two were unaware of his secret: that he was the one who had murdered Tama. He'd disappeared for a few days to the Grand Lands, hoping that he could escape his grisly actions. It took the help of a mad scientist called Wazimu to show him how to carry on with his life.

"Someone evil," Haiba lied. "A horrific creature. It looked uglier than you could possibly imagine. I saw it."

"Saw what?" asked Nala.

"The murder," Haiba said. "I saw it kill Tama. I was so angry. So angry that... I just had to go after it. I hunted the thing down for days, and when I finally found it, I got my revenge. I tore its throat out. It was dead before it hit the ground."

Simba and Nala exchanged a glance with each other.

"You went after it," Nala said slowly, "for *revenge*?"

Haiba nodded. "Yep. She was a good friend—while I knew her, of course. She deserved to be avenged."

Simba smiled a little. "You learn well," he said. "If I knew that had happened, then I would have done the same thing myself. I was beginning to think that you might have had something to do with it." He chuckled, and Haiba could only chuckle back. The former Prince of the Pride Lands was totally unaware of the truth...

"That's a good one," Haiba laughed. "As if I would actually *murder* anyone! You're a real riot, Simba!"

"Yeah, yeah," Nala said quickly, not really wanting to joke about such things. To be honest, she felt rather saddened by the murder. Not only was Tojo dead, but also Tama. Things had started so miserably for those two, and they had *ended* miserably as well. It struck her as absolutely tragic.

But then that wasn't to say that her own life couldn't end in tragedy also...

"I think we need to focus on more important things right now," Nala said, frowning at the two. She was happy to have Haiba back, but there were still incredibly significant things that needed to be done. "For a start: what about the Pride Lands? Do we still stand any chance of bringing them back?"

She doubted it. The chances of bringing the Pride Lands back were about the same as Simba's parents magically returning to life. It just wasn't going to happen.

"I think so," Simba said confidently. "Where there's a will, there's a way."

"And just what is *that* supposed to mean?" Nala demanded. "So far, all we know is that the spell around the kingdom is caused by the most horrifying thing imaginable. That's not really much of a help. We need more information."

"I'll ask *more* animals," Simba said through gritted teeth. "If I have to beat information out of them, then I will. It's what matters to me the most. And once we get the kingdom back, we can be happy again. Isn't that what *all* of us want?"

Nala turned away from him, a heartbroken look in her eyes. "Yeah... sure."

"Who are we supposed to ask, Simba?" Haiba questioned. "We've tried that already. We just keep on being led to dead end after dead end. We could always just retire and live here for the rest of our lives."

Simba suddenly grabbed Haiba by his chest fur. "Now, you listen here, Haiba," he snarled, "and you listen good. This is about glory. This is about respect. This is about becoming the king and ruling over your land. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," Haiba said nervously.

"Good." Simba released him. "Now, there are several forms of torture we could use to make the animals squeal—"

"No," Nala cut in, staring at him disapprovingly. "We're not torturing anyone, Simba. I've just about had enough of your 'kill

first and ask questions later' approach. Can't we do something *normal* for once?"

"And just what is your definition of 'normal'?" Simba challenged. "We don't have time for 'normal'. We have to focus on our mission. Nothing else matters. It's kill or be kill—"

Nala covered his mouth with a paw. "And I'm sick of you saying that, too," she said. "It's like you've become evil, Simba. Some days I even think that you could become like... Scar."

Simba glared at her furiously. "Don't you *dare* compare me to that creep," he snapped. "He was pathetic. A whiny child who was always jealous of his brother. I'm ten times the lion Scar was."

Nala stared back. "If you say so."

"Come on, guys," Haiba said, pulling them close to him. "We don't have to be arguing all the time. I mean, just look at the sun. It's a lovely day."

The two cubs saw that he was right. The grey clouds—which had been hanging dully in the air for the past few weeks—had finally passed, allowing the bright sunlight to shine down. It was the warmest day they'd had in a long while.

"So what?" Simba asked. "Who cares about the weather?"

"Okay, Mr Grumpy," Haiba said, "I think you need to take a break. Just sit down in the sun, put your paws up and relax. I know just the place. It's called Jowai Resort, and—"

"Haiba," Nala interrupted.

"What?"

"We *live* at the resort."

"Oh, yeah." Haiba scratched his head. "I forgot for a second there." He shrugged. "Looks like we'll have to find somewhere else to enjoy ourselves, then."

"We're not enjoying anything!" Simba declared. "We have work to do."

"Simba, we all need a break sometimes," Haiba said. "We've been on these adventures nonstop for weeks now. Isn't it about time we just had a day to ourselves? We just need to... forget about all our troubles for a little while."

"And where exactly do you plan on going?" Nala asked. "To be honest, I wouldn't exactly *mind* a little day away from all this..."

"Let's just take a walk," Haiba said. "I'm sure there are plenty of exotic locations out there with fun things to do. Come on—let's do something different for once. You know you want to."

"Well, I'm up for it," Nala said, smiling at her friend.

"Simba..." Haiba used one of his classic cheesy grins on the cub.

Simba frowned, as if to argue further, but then he relented. "This had better be quick."

"Thank you!" Haiba said, and then started to drag them away. "We're gonna have a really great day together. I just *know* it!"

AN: Famous last words from Haiba there. You just *know* things are going to go terribly wrong for our three heroes. But what's going on at Camp Kazi? What's this new counsellor up to? Did you know there are only four stories left before I stop asking these sort of questions?

Ah, well. Leave some nice reviews and I'll be back tomorrow.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3: Lost in the Dirt

AN: Strange things are going on in Camp Kazi... Can our three cubs make things a little clearer? Let's hope so.

Haradion: The plot changed slightly. I can't say I didn't lie a little bit to protect the story...

yeti1995: There's always a thin slither of hope. Of course, it can dwindle...

Chapter Three: Lost in the Dirt

"Oh, wow!" Simba feigned a look of utter surprise and excitement. "You've really opened my eyes to the wonders of the world, Haiba! I think I'll change my ways and we'll just travel far and wide—for ever and ever!"

Haiba shared the same excited look. "Really?" he exclaimed.

"No!" Simba snapped. "This is stupid! All I can see is ten thousand miles of dirt! You call *this* exciting?"

"Hmm..." Haiba looked around the sea of dirt, frowning. It surrounded them on all sides. Even though they were out in the open, they still felt completely trapped. "I knew we should have taken that left turn at—"

"Okay, how do we find our way back?" Simba interrupted, turning around. "I just want to find the resort and stay there. This is getting ridiculous."

"Well..." Nala looked as though she didn't want to admit the truth. "I think we might be lost."

"Lost?" Simba shook his head. "No, no, no, no, no—we can't be *lost*. Only lost animals are lost!"

"But that's what we are," Nala persisted. "*Lost!*"

"This can't get any worse," Simba moaned, slapping a paw to his face. "Why didn't any of you check where we were going? Couldn't you have looked over your shoulder just *once*?"

"I was... focusing on the scenery," Nala replied with a nervous chuckle. She pretty much expected what Simba's reaction would be.

"Focusing... on the scenery?" he said slowly. Nala could see just by his expression that he was beginning to turn nasty. "We're stuck in the middle of nowhere just because *you wanted to focus on the scenery*?"

"Let's just all calm down," Haiba said, sticking a paw around Simba's shoulder. He smiled innocently at him. "Simba, you don't need to put your angry face on. There are more important things to think about."

"Like how I'm going to rip Nala to shreds?" Simba suggested.

"Aside from that," Haiba replied. "If we're going to get back to the resort, then we have to work together. We're the team, right? The three miscreants!"

"If we're such a team," Simba argued, "then why are we wasting our time trying to do something fun when we could be working?"

"Okay, Haiba," Nala said, turning to him. "Have you got your bearings?"

"No, it's just the way my tail sticks up," Haiba responded.

Nala rolled her eyes. "No, that's not what I mean. I mean, can you figure out where we are by observing the surroundings?"

"Yes!" Haiba pointed at her with a claw. "Yes, you're absolutely right! Wait... look..." He gestured with both forepaws to the endless ground in front of them. "*Dirt!*"

"Nothing else?" Nala asked. "Is it... a special *kind* of dirt?"

Simba laughed at this. "A special kind of dirt? That's a good one. Your tracking skills are brilliant."

"Well, at least I'm trying!" Nala snapped. "Maybe if you weren't so pessimistic, then we'd be out of here by now!"

"Let me check..." Haiba lowered his head towards the ground, and took a lick of the dirt. "Dry. Slightly flexible. Perfect for digging." He smiled at the two. "Yep—I'd say we're close to the old Camp Kazi place."

"You're kidding." Simba surveyed the dirt, and suddenly recognised it. It was all coming back to him now... "Now I know where we are."

Back when Mufasa and Sarabi were possessed by the Vimelea, they had sent Simba away to a camp for misbehaving cubs. It was called Camp Kazi, and was run by a lion called Maana. He was the type of lion who liked to shout and yell all of the time. He forced Simba to dig holes for the short time he was there, because he was searching for a Uchoyo Diamond: a magical object that could hypnotise any animal from the moment they laid eyes on it. Simba previously had an encounter with the mystical diamond before...

"Camp Kazi?" said Nala, and her expression turned to one of dismay. "Oh, no. Not that dumb place."

"I wouldn't look so worried if I were you," Haiba told them. "I mean, the place is closed down now. It's not much of a danger to us."

"Yeah," Simba said, remembering how his time there had come to an end. "Those skeletons dragged that counsellor down to his death."

"That was pretty messed up," Nala said, having been present when it occurred. "I wouldn't like to go back there anytime soon."

"Well, we're going to *have* to go back there," Haiba revealed, much to the other cubs' surprise.

"What?" Nala said. "Why do we have to go back there?"

"It's the only way I'm going to be able to find out where we are," Haiba said. "If I can find all those holes, then I know what direction we can head in to get back to the jungle. It's really fuzzy around here, though. No holes at all."

"Clearly his search didn't stretch this far," Simba observed. "Although if he were still alive, then I bet we'd be seeing holes around here. That guy was crazy. Who on earth would want an Uchoyo Diamond?"

"Someone who wanted to control everything," Nala said simply. "Like you."

"It was controlling me," Simba argued. "Not the other way around."

"Whatever," Nala said, striding off into the desert of dirt. "Let's find this stupid camp, then. If he's going to be miserable all day, then there's no point in having any fun."

"See what you do?" Haiba asked, gesturing to Nala as she walked away. "You ruin everyone's day, Simba. Why can't you just lighten up for a change?"

"There's no room for happiness in this world," Simba called after them as they got further and further away from him. "In the end, you'll know I'm right!"

He bounded after them. "Aren't you guys gonna wait for me? You don't know what dangers could be lurking in that camp! I'm the one who had to *stay* there!"

"I'm sure there's no danger," Haiba said. "The place is closed down. I don't think anyone else is going to take advantage of a few thousand holes. They don't know there might be Uchoyo Diamonds buried underneath."

Little did the three cubs know that the camp was going to be much worse from last time...

"Phew!" Haiba wiped his forehead with a paw. "It's hot out here today! I'm sweating—and I didn't think that was possible!"

"Look!" Nala pointed to the ground. "Holes!"

The three cubs could indeed see several holes scattered around the endless sea of dirt; they had to be on the outskirts of the camp.

"Yeah," Simba agreed. "We're getting close. Wait a minute..." He narrowed his eyes in bemusement. "Can you hear voices?"

"Voices?" Haiba listened out. "Yeah... Come to think of it, I can."

"So can I," Nala agreed. "What's going on here? I thought this place was supposed to be closed down."

"It *was*," Simba said. "Either we're hearing ghosts, or something very wrong is going on around here."

"I think I can see some cubs over there," Haiba said, squinting so he could see into the distance. He could just about make out the outline of several figures working frantically with their paws. "It looks like they're... *digging*."

Simba shook his head, walking at a faster pace as he got closer and closer to the camp. "Oh, no. Not this again."

"But... I don't get it," Haiba said, visibly puzzled. "How can they reopen it? There was only one counsellor here. No one is supposed to know that this place exists!"

"Obviously not," Simba said. "Because someone *has* reopened it."

The three cubs stopped, as they found themselves nearly boxed in on all sides by the holes. There were hundreds—thousands—of them now in sight. They could see several cubs digging fresh ones, looking absolutely focused on their work. It was as if nothing else mattered to them at all.

"What is going on here?" Nala asked, her eyes darting from cub to cub. They were all doing the same thing. Strangely enough, they all seemed happy at the fact. "There are more of them. Last time, it was just you."

"It's impossible," Simba said, looking horrified himself. "This has to be a mirage or something. That counsellor died. Dragged into a hole by skeletons. There was no way he could possibly escape."

"Maybe we should just go and ask them," Nala said, walking over to one of the cubs. "Hey—excuse me! Why are you digging these holes?"

"I love my work," the cub replied, and kept on scooping up the dirt.

"Huh?" Nala didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

"I love my work," he repeated, his dopey expression unchanging.

"Right..." Unnerved, Nala turned back to her friends. "I think something's wrong with that cub. He's very... freaky."

"Or he's lost his mind," Simba retorted. "I think we'd better find whatever counsellor is running this place and find out what he's up to."

"Whoa!" exclaimed a voice from behind them. "You're, like, not supposed to be here, little dudes! This is totally radical!"

Simba, Nala and Haiba slowly turned around—

—and came face to face with the new counsellor.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4: The New Campers

Chapter Four: The New Campers

The three cubs screamed in fright as the camp counsellor was revealed to them. He was a very slim lion, with a well-kept blonde name and golden brown fur. His bright blue eyes seemed to glow in the sunlight. Simba, Nala and Haiba all felt slightly disturbed by the sight of him.

"Who are you?" Simba demanded, pointing at him. He could tell right from the start that something sinister was going on in this newly reopened camp. If these cubs were digging holes, then he knew that it couldn't be for any good reason. It was obvious that this new camp counsellor—whoever he was—wanted something for his own greedy needs. "And what are you doing with these cubs?"

"Dude, just chill. My name is, like, Shauri," said the counsellor. "And I'm not doing anything with those other little dudes. They're just, like, exercising."

"Exercising?" Nala said. "What kind of exercise involves digging holes?"

"Don't look at me," said Shauri. "They *want* to dig the holes. It, like, *changes* them. It's so radical. Total mindblower."

"Why does he speak in that odd accent?" Haiba whispered in Simba's ear.

Simba waved a paw to silence him. "Look, it's no use trying to lie to us," he told the camp counsellor. "We know that you're up to something. So come clean and tell us the truth! Then we just might let you live."

"I'm only running the new camp, little dude," Shauri explained, sounding as calm as ever. "I'm just trying to teach these other little dudes to have fun and learn. Digging holes is part of testing their strength. I don't see what your problem is."

"Well... he doesn't exactly seem evil," Nala said, scratching her head in confusion. She seriously doubted that a lion as brainless as this couldn't possibly be up to anything sinister. He probably had no concept of greed or lust. "Maybe he is just trying to run a camp, after all."

"You can't be serious," Simba said. "What camp involves digging holes?"

"It's not unlikely for a camp to introduce hard labour into their activity list," Haiba informed them. "I suppose, in a way, the digging does build character."

"I sense a lot of stress and strain in your lives, little dudes," Shauri told them. "You guys should totally, like, enrol sometime."

"Us? Enrol? At your camp?" Simba laughed at this. "That has to be the dumbest idea I've ever heard! As if I'd join this place! I'd have to be—" He cut himself off as a sudden thought occurred to him.

Hmm... there's something definitely going on with this camp, he told himself. Wouldn't it be much easier to find out what's going on if you're on the inside rather than on the outside? This guy's stupid, anyway. He won't suspect a thing!

"Excuse me for one second," Simba said to the counsellor, before turning to Nala and Haiba. "Hey, guys. We should enrol."

"What?" both Nala and Haiba exclaimed, unable to believe what they were hearing. Simba—the cub who was obsessed with nothing but getting his home back—wanted to *join a summer camp*?

"Simba, did you lose your brain or something?" Nala asked. "Ten seconds ago, you were laughing about this camp. Now you want to become *part* of it?"

"No, you don't understand," Simba told them. "We all know that there's something going on with this camp, right?"

Nala and Haiba both nodded.

"Okay," said Simba. "And this guy isn't gonna give anything away, whether he's dumb or not. So, we need to be on the inside in order to find out what he's planning. We have to enrol if we stand any chance of figuring out why he's using these cubs to dig."

"I have to say, this sounds a little... risky," Haiba confessed. "What if he figures us out?"

"That's the beauty of it," Simba said, smiling. "We're going to just pretend to be ordinary campers. Then we'll be doing exactly the same things that all the other cubs are doing. It's the perfect plan. There's no other way we're ever gonna find out what's going on. What do you think?"

Nala sighed, giving in. Simba was right. Unless they were actually part of the camp, there was no chance of them figuring out what this counsellor was planning. "Oh, all right, then. I guess we have nothing else to do."

"Yeah," Haiba agreed, shrugging. "Why not? Sounds like fun. Plus it'll stop you from being so grouchy with us."

"Yes!" Simba exclaimed, turning to Shauri. "We'd be very happy to enrol in your camp. Besides, our parents have all been eaten by hungry rhinos. We have nowhere else to go! Please show some mercy and accept us into your family." He hugged one of Shauri's forelegs as tightly as he possibly could.

"Whoa, okay, little dude," Shauri said, smiling down at Simba. "Welcome to the camp!"

"Really?" Simba asked, looking up at the skinny lion.

"Sure," said the counsellor. "All are welcome at Camp Kazi. It's a rule. Or something like that."

"Oh, thank you!" Simba exclaimed, looking as though he couldn't possibly contain his excitement. "This'll mean the world to us! Isn't that right, guys?"

Nala and Haiba shuffled their paws awkwardly.

"Yeah," Nala said. "Sure..."

"I guess we'd better introduce you to the other campers," Shauri said. He cupped his forepaws around his mouth and began yelling to the other cubs, who were still digging the holes. "Campers! It's time for a meeting, little dudes!"

As if programmed to automatically respond, the remaining cubs immediately stopped digging at the same time. They began to clamber out of their holes and march towards Shauri, who was still acting his usual laidback self.

"Just form a circle, little dudes," Shauri instructed. "We've got some new campers to introduce into the group."

Simba, Nala and Haiba watched as the cubs formed a neat, perfect circle around them and Shauri. They all sat down on the ground in unison, staring straight at them. It was quite unsettling.

Shauri patted Simba gently on the shoulder. "These three little dudes are gonna be joining the camp. We're gonna have lots of fun together. Just like we always do. Isn't that right, guys?"

"Yes, Shauri," the cubs all replied at the same time. "We always have fun. *Always*."

Shauri chuckled. Simba, Nala and Haiba just looked at each other. They didn't quite understand what was going on yet.

"So, what are your names, little dudes?" Shauri asked the three cubs.

"Well, my name is Simba," he introduced himself, waving at all the cubs, who were all gazing intently at him. "Uh... hi."

"Hello, Simba," all the cubs said.

"I'm Nala," Nala said. She waved, too.

"Hello, Nala," replied the cubs.

"And I'm Haiba," said Haiba. "You have very beautiful—and eerily disturbing—voices."

"Hello, Haiba," said the cubs.

"This is so fun!" exclaimed Shauri. The three cubs noticed that the new camp counsellor always seemed so happy. It was very creepy. *Scary*, even. It was almost *too* obvious that he was up to something now...

"I want you all to give Simba, Nala and Haiba the standard Camp Kazi welcome," Shauri told the campers.

The standard Camp Kazi welcome? thought Nala worriedly. *I dread to think what that means...*

"We will, Shauri," the cubs agreed. "We will make them *very* welcome."

"Why do they all speak at once?" Haiba asked Simba. "It's really starting to freak me out."

"Just go with it," Simba whispered. "I don't think we'll be here for very long. We'll have this place closed down again by tomorrow. Even if I have to kill this Shauri guy."

"Again with the violence," Haiba said. "We can't just have a nice conversation with him, can we?"

"I seriously doubt that a conversation is going to work on a psychopathic camp counsellor," Simba told him.

"What makes you think he's psychopathic?" Haiba asked.

"Well—" But before Simba could say anything more, Shauri spoke up.

"Now, if we're going to induct these three little dudes into the camp, then they have to say the Camp Kazi oath," the counsellor explained. "You're okay with that, right, little dudes?"

"Uh... yeah," Simba said. He remembered having to do a similar thing with the previous camp counsellor. Although that was the Oath of Evil, Good-for-nothing Cubs. He didn't know what oath he would have to say this time. "Sure."

"It's really easy," Shauri explained. "You put your right paw to your heart, and you say, 'I will be a happy and obedient camper for as long as I shall live.' Okay?"

Simba, Nala and Haiba both put their right forepaws to their hearts, and spoke the oath in unison.

"I will be a happy and obedient camper for as long as I shall live."

Shauri clapped his forepaws together, delighted. "Brilliant! This is so cool! You are now official Camp Kazi campers. This must be the greatest day of your lives!"

"Oh, yeah," Simba said sarcastically, nodding his head. "There's nothing I'd rather be doing than wasting my time in a pathetic camp."

"I know, right?" agreed Shauri, grinning. "Now, the first thing we're gonna do is assign you your group. All three of you are gonna be in Group D with Kambi. Kambi!"

One cub got up from the circle, wandering over to them. "Yes, master?"

"I want you to look after these three," Shauri explained. "Make sure that they don't get into any trouble, okay?"

"Yes, master," Kambi said, looking more dazed than the rest of them. "I will obey."

"Okay, that's the camp meeting over, everyone," Shauri announced. "You can all get back to your jobs. Be back here at sundown. I have something special planned. You're all going to find it totally radical!"

"This way, please," Kambi said, leading the way for the three cubs across the ground. "Follow me."

Simba, Nala and Haiba did as they were told. They watched as the cubs scattered in every direction, heading back to their work.

And all the while they were asking themselves the same question.

What the heck is going on around here?

AN: Things just keep getting more and more peculiar. Something odd is going on in this camp. And I bet none of us trust that evil surfer dude, Shauri! He's up to something...

Well, it looks like I'm going to leave you on another mysterious note. I'm sure you all think there's some sort of conspiracy going on that connects this story with the finale... Leave your crackpot theories in the review section.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5: The Object

AN: Camp Kazi remains mysterious. What is that evil surfer dude up to? Well, you'll get some answers—and about a hundred more questions. Enjoy!

Guest: You love my series? Why, thank you! It's always a pleasure to hear compliments like that. I'll miss the series too when I finish. But all good things must come to an end.

Chapter Five: The Object

Simba, Nala and Haiba kept a close eye out for anything odd as they followed Kambi across the barren wasteland that made up the camp. But there were far too many odd things going on already. For a start: why did all the cubs talk like they were zombies? Shauri didn't exactly strike them as the type of lion who possessed hypnotic powers. In fact, he seemed like the type of lion who possessed no powers at all. So, how exactly was he doing this?

"This is really confusing," Nala whispered as they followed the dazed cub. "How is he controlling all of these cubs?"

"You think he's controlling them?" Haiba asked. He looked rather surprised at that possibility.

"Obviously," Simba said, staring at Haiba like he was dumb. "Why else would the cubs act like that?"

"Well, has it ever occurred to you that the camp might just be *extremely* boring?" Haiba suggested. "I mean, it is possible that the activity of digging holes all day has just made them really, really *stupid*. I mean, just look at this kid in front of us! His brain has turned to goo!" He shouted at Kambi. "Hey! Lovely weather we're having!"

"I love my work," Kambi replied, still with a dopey smile on his face. It was like his mind had gone completely blank, leaving nothing but a desire to obey.

"See?" Haiba turned to his friends. "He's lost it! Completely cuckoo! That's how boring this place is!"

"I seriously doubt that boredom will cause you to say 'I love my work' every time you ask him something," Simba replied, slicing his theory in two. "It's obvious that this guy is using some kind of hypnosis on them."

"A Uchoyo Diamond?" Nala guessed. "That's what it looks like."

"But that doesn't add up," Haiba said. "When Simba was there, that counsellor had you digging for a Uchoyo Diamond. If this Shauri guy already has one, then what reason is there to make them dig?"

"Okay..." Simba racked his brains for more ideas. "So I'm guessing that there must be something else buried underneath the dirt. Something other than Uchoyo Diamonds. But what? It just doesn't make sense..."

"And I don't know where this cub is taking us," Nala said, as they walked further and further away. The holes were starting to become sparse once more; they could only see about four or five of them on either side now. "This is the type of place where animals are taken to die."

"Yeah..." Haiba agreed. "You could bury someone underneath all this dirt, and no one would ever know. There's no telling what kind of scary monsters could be buried under the ground..."

"I'd be shocked if I found one," Nala said. She glanced up at the sky; the heat didn't exactly feel very comfortable. It had to be the hottest part of the day. "I hate this sun. It's really getting to me."

"You're not the only one," Simba said, exhaling a deep breath. "I'm beginning to wish that those clouds would come back."

Without warning, Kambi stopped. "Here we are," he announced, in the same dull voice. "This is where we sleep."

The three cubs both looked up and down the plain of absolute nothingness. For as far as the eye could see, all that was visible was dirt. There wasn't even a hole in sight. Had they really travelled this far?

"*This* is where you sleep?" Nala asked, looking at Kambi in disbelief. "But there's no shade. You must be frying to death every night!"

"I'm burning just *thinking* about it," Haiba said. "If we go to sleep here, we're gonna wake up as piles of ash."

"We can't sleep without shade," Nala said, shaking her head. "I don't even understand how you can survive out here. Buzzards would think you were dead. Your eyeballs should be pecked out by now!"

"We are very happy here," Kambi said. "Very happy." He just continued to smile, looking so far away...

"Yeah..." Haiba nodded his head. "I'd be happy with a fiery inferno to sleep on, too. I just *love* the feeling of all my skin burning away."

"You are allowed one hour of rest," Kambi informed them. "Then you will dig. I must now return to my work." He turned and began to walk away, leaving the three of them there in the sweltering heat.

"Well, that was some extensive information he provided us with," Simba said sarcastically. "I'm staring to hate this place even more than last time. Are we just supposed to sit here for an hour and do nothing?"

"Yep," Haiba said, and sat down on the ground. "Soak up some rays and just enjoy the heat, Simba. It's even hotter now that I'm around."

"Shut up, Haiba," Simba snapped. "We have to figure this out. If we don't figure out how he's hypnotising the cubs, then we could end up hypnotised ourselves. Do you *want* to be a mindless slave?"

"Uh, no," Haiba replied.

"Then start thinking," Simba ordered. "Otherwise I will dig a hole, kill you, throw you in the hole, and then fill it back up with dirt. Is that clear?"

"Yeah, yeah," Haiba said. "I don't know what I'm supposed to be thinking about, though. The only way we're ever gonna learn anything is if we actually speak to one of the campers."

"And how are we supposed to do that when their minds have been melted?" Nala asked. "They barely respond to anything."

"No, no, no..." Haiba shook his head. "I could use my charms on them. In fact, I'll go up to one right now." He hopped to his paws. "Nala, how do I look?"

"You use your eyeballs, don't you?"

"Eyeballs. Got it." Haiba started to walk away, but Simba pulled him back.

"Hold on," Simba said. "I think we should break a cub out of the trance and *then* question them. Hopefully, they'll remember something that will be helpful to us. Like how he's hypnotising them."

"Sounds like a plan," Nala said. "I say we grab that Kambi kid and slap him across the face until he snaps out of it!"

"Uh... won't that hurt?" Haiba asked.

"Haiba, I don't think he'd care," Nala responded. "Wouldn't *you* be happy if you had your free will back?"

"Well, it depends," Haiba said. "If my free will was consumed by a seductive lioness who wanted me for some kind of romantic purpose, then—"

"Actually, don't answer the question," Nala interrupted. "Let's just grab the kid and see what happens."

Five minutes later, the three cubs were sneaking up on Kambi as carefully as they possibly could. They doubted that he could hear them, though. The hypnosis was probably so powerful that his senses weren't at their best.

"And... pounce!" Simba exclaimed, and the three cubs did just that. They quickly pinned Kambi to the ground, restricting him of all movement. The cub didn't make any sort of protest. He just stared straight up at the sky, the dopey expression on his face unchanging.

"Slap him!" Nala commanded.

Simba slapped him repeatedly across the face with all his might, hoping that the amount of force would snap Kambi out of the incredibly deep trance. "Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"

The three cubs watched as the dopey look faded away from Kambi's face. The cub shook his head frantically, and Simba

finally stopped striking him. "I did it! He's snapped out of it!"

"Wh-what happened?" mumbled Kambi, blinking several times as his senses slowly returned to him. "Where am I?"

"Kambi, you have to listen to us," Simba said, staring right into his eyes, trying to get his attention. "What happened to you?"

"Who are you?" Kambi asked, confused by the sight of them all. "I... I was digging, and—"

"Good, good," Simba interrupted. "Now, can you remember what the camp counsellor is planning?"

"The camp counsellor?" Kambi closed his eyes, struggling to remember. "Shauri... he wanted us to dig..."

"What for?" Nala interjected, stood by Simba's side. "What is he looking for?"

"I don't know," Kambi replied. "He just said it was to test our strength. Then... then he showed me that... that *thing*..."

"What thing?" Simba asked. "What was it?"

"Something glowing..." Kambi focused his memories. Having only come out of the trance, his mind wasn't working at its best. "Something... something *shiny*. It was the shiniest thing I'd ever seen. I couldn't look away. It was so beautiful. I just... I wanted to submit to whoever was holding it."

The three cubs looked at each other.

"Uchoyo Diamond," they all chorused.

"What's happened?" Kambi asked. "And who are you three?"

"We're just... campers," Nala explained. "We're trying to work out what's going on around here. We think the counsellor is planning something evil."

"He... he hypnotised me," Kambi realised. "I didn't even want to come here in the first place. My mother made me."

"Then go back to her," Simba advised. "Tell her that the camp has closed down."

"What? Really?" Kambi said, bringing himself into a sitting position.

"Yeah," Simba said. "You might want to get out of here before things turn nasty. And they *will* turn nasty, by the way."

"Wow. Thanks," Kambi said, and he started walking away from them.

"Well, he's safe," Haiba said, watching as the cub began his journey home. "We should just go around slapping all of the cubs in the face."

"It wouldn't be that simple," Simba said. "Shauri would find us before we could snap them all out of it."

"So what do we do?" Nala asked.

"Simple," said Simba. "We start work."

***Chapter 6*: Chapter 6: The Failed Escape**

Chapter Six: The Failed Escape

"Whoa!" Haiba exclaimed, as he scooped up some dirt in his paws and dumped it on the pile next to his hole. "I can see why you hated it so much here, Simba. Digging holes is harder work than I thought."

The three cubs had found an untouched spot in the neverending mass of holes and began digging next to each other. Within the next couple of hours, they were very nearly finished with their work. The sun was slowly beginning to set over the purpling horizon. At least the hottest part of the day was over for them. They didn't feel like they were boiling alive now.

"Well..." Simba grunted as he dumped more dirt on his own pile. "I think that I've become accustomed to digging these things. It didn't take that long for me to dig Tama's grave. At least we manage to give her a proper burial—unlike Tojo."

They didn't see Haiba flinch at the mention of Tama.

"We should have gone back, you know," Nala said. "Tojo did deserve a proper burial. It didn't matter if his body was mangled to pieces."

"It's nature's problem now," Simba replied. "The buzzards have probably eaten away everything, leaving just scraps and bones. Too late to do anything."

"You're so sympathetic, Simba," Haiba said, leaning against the side of his hole as he took a momentary break. "You've got a real big heart, you know that?"

"I don't have time to think back on the past anymore," Simba said. "I buried Tama, and that should be good enough for you. Deal with it."

"I think we're missing the point here," Nala interjected. "Shouldn't we be investigating this camp a little more? I know you said we should start work, but I thought there'd be a bit more involved than just digging holes."

"We don't want Shauri catching on to us," Simba explained, "so we're gonna do exactly what we wants. Then, we go to that meeting at sundown, and find out more. Maybe he'll try to hypnotise us like he did with the other campers."

"If that's the case, then we're pretty doomed, aren't we?" Nala asked. "We'll be under his control."

"I think I can resist a little hypnosis," Simba told them. "You two just need to look away if he pulls out that diamond."

"Yeah—pretty tight plan," said Haiba sarcastically, rolling his eyes. He picked up some more dirt and placed it on top of his pile. "That should do it. I think I've finished." He clambered out of the hole, rolling onto his back. "I'm exhausted."

"You're not the only one," Nala said, as she finished digging her own hole. "I've never had to do anything like that before in my life. I'd sleep if there was any shade around here. But no—we get to burn alive instead. Great."

"There's no time for sleep," Simba said. "We have to shut down this camp before Shauri completes his evil plan—whatever it is."

"And you think we can find out in this meeting?" Haiba asked. "I don't know. Why would he go blabbing about his evil plan to the campers?"

"They're under his control," Simba said. "It's not like they're gonna tell anyone. I bet he's gonna reveal all his secrets this evening. I'd bet my future kingdom on it."

"If you *have* a future kingdom," Haiba mumbled.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Haiba let out a yawn and closed his eyes. "I'm taking a quick nap. Wake me up when the meeting starts."

Simba frowned and pushed Haiba into his hole. "Hey!" he exclaimed, landing with a *thump!* in the dirt below. "What the heck did you do that for?"

"I said no sleep," Simba said, climbing out of his hole. "We need to focus. Anything could happen around here." He observed the other campers as they obediently went about their work, digging and digging. They had been doing the same thing all day.

"Looks pretty similar to me," Haiba said, joining Simba by his side. "They just keep digging."

"That's some strong hypnosis," Simba said.

"The Uchoyo Diamond is one of the most powerful magical objects on earth," Haiba told him. "They're not going to break out of the trance unless you use force—like we did with that Kambi kid."

"As I said before, we can't do it all at once," Simba said, shaking his head. "I want to know what he's digging for, first."

"Has to be something important," Haiba said. "I'd just take the diamond and run."

"It's turning evening," Nala observed, watching as the sun was slowly beginning to disappear over the horizon. "The meeting will be starting soon."

"Yo, campers!" Shauri's voice sounded from in the distance. "It's time for a camp meeting! Form a circle! I think you'll find that this is, like, a *very* important meeting, too."

"Here we go," Simba said, walking off as the hypnotised cubs began to climb out of their holes. "I can't wait to see what he has to say this time."

Nala turned to Haiba as they walked away. "Am I the only one who has a really bad feeling about this?"

Haiba shrugged. "I think it's a lot less dangerous than anything else we've been doing recently. I mean, Aibu, Tojo, the mad scientist."

"The mad scientist?" Nala said, confused.

"Uh, I mean, the mad dinosaurs," Haiba said nervously, covering up his tracks. "The mad dinosaurs. Yeah. Those were pretty scary."

"Come on, campers!" Shauri was beckoning the zombie-like cubs over to him. They all walked silently towards the counsellor.

"Wait a minute..." Simba narrowed his eyes as he spotted something next to where Shauri was stood. "Do you see that?"

"Yeah," Nala agreed, squinting to see what it was. "That's a... that's a *body*!"

"A *body*?" Haiba exclaimed.

There was indeed a body lying on the ground next to Shauri. As Simba, Nala and Haiba got closer and closer, they soon realised that they knew who it was...

"Oh, no," Nala said, horrified, as they arrived at the circle. "It's Kambi."

Kambi was indeed dead. But the odd thing was that there seemed to be no apparent cause of death. There were no marks or cuts on his body. No injuries of any sort. Nothing to suggest that he had been murdered.

Of course, he *had* been murdered. That much was obvious.

"Sit down, little dudes," Shauri said. "This is a very important meeting."

Simba, Nala and Haiba sat down in the circle, unsure of how Shauri had possibly gotten to Kambi before he could escape the camp. The cub was more than a mile away... They were sure of it.

"I've gotta say, I'm not very happy, campers," Shauri told them. "Someone—who's *totally* not radical, by the way—has decided to try and escape. Now, we know that's not a cool thing to do, don't we, campers?"

"Yes, Shauri," the other cubs said, their gaze never shifting from him.

"Now, this little dude didn't listen." He jabbed a claw in the direction of Kambi's corpse. "And he totally paid the price for it. Because, as we all know, if you try to escape... then you will die."

Simba, Nala and Haiba looked at each other, stunned by what they were hearing. Shauri had never spoken like this before to them. Clearly he was more than just an evil counsellor. He was a killer. A cold-blooded murderer.

"If you try to escape," Shauri told them chillingly, "then I will, like, kill you, little dudes. Just like this camper here. You will all die if you do not follow my orders. I hope you, like, listen to me when I say that. None of you will try to escape. *Or else*. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Shauri," the cubs obeyed. "We shall not try to escape."

"That's great, little dudes," Shauri said, smiling once more. Gone was the murderous glint that had once shone in his blue eyes. "Now, to teach you all a lesson, I want you to dig three more holes by the morning. Oh, and I want one of you little dudes to help me with something important. Uh... how about you?" He pointed to a cub with dark brown fur, who slowly got up, walking towards him.

"Yes, Shauri," said the cub obediently. "I will help you."

"Good," said Shauri. "Now, get to work, little campers! The digging is only gonna make you stronger!"

As the cubs went back to their work, continuing to dig without question, Simba, Nala and Haiba slowly climbed to their paws. They watched as Shauri disappeared into the darkening horizon with the cub he had asked to help him.

"I don't believe it," Nala said, shocked by what had transpired. "How did he find Kambi? How did he even know he was escaping?"

"I don't know," Simba replied. "I thought he was all the way over the other side of the camp." His gaze shifted over to the corpse that still lay a few feet away from them. "Let's go and check out the body. I want to know how he died."

They checked to make sure that Shauri was out of sight before heading over to Kambi's corpse. "Doesn't look like he's been attacked," Simba observed, lifting up one of his paws to check for any obvious marks. "There aren't any cuts or bruises."

"That's... odd," Nala said. "You can't murder someone without causing *some* kind of injury."

"I know," Simba agreed. He placed a paw over the cub's closed eyelids, and began to open them. "Let's take a look at his eyes..."

The three cubs gasped at what they saw.

Kambi's eyes were blank.

AN: Ooh. Creepy little cliffhanger, there. How on earth did Shauri track Kambi down? What kind of death would cause his eyes to go blank? This is turning into quite the mystery. Of course, I'll resolve it in the final chapter. Don't forget to review, and I'll see you then!

Chapter 7: Chapter 7: The Thief

AN: This chapter ended up being longer than I expected. Oh, well. I'm sure you like the final chapters to be long, anyway. Seeing as it's the last usual story of the series, I think you'll be grateful.

MarkPol: Nope. No angst in this story. You all deserve a break.

the-mysterious-other: All of you have theories on how it will end. But I won't say anything.

Chapter Seven: The Thief

"Oh, my gosh," Nala gasped, backing away from the corpse. She could only stare at Kambi's lifeless blank eyes. "What the heck happened to him?"

Haiba looked away, shaking his head. "You know, I'm just about sick of finding all these bodies," he admitted. "One day, I'm gonna end up finding you two lying dead somewhere. Or you two will find me. Either way, it sucks."

"Haiba, be quiet," Simba said. He was the only one who didn't appear all that horrified to discover that Kambi's eyes were completely blank. In fact, he was still staring at them, infinitely curious. "Hmm... this just keeps getting weirder."

"Did that counsellor take away part of his eyes or something?" Nala asked, not knowing what to make of the odd—and incredibly frightening—occurrence. "That's just... just *freaky*. I don't like it."

"When did you ever like *anything* involving dead corpses?" asked Haiba. "I mean, 'cause it was such a blast finding Tojo, wasn't it?"

"That's not what I mean," Nala said. "Who kills someone like this? His throat should be slit wide open, or his legs should be broken. I don't know—something *normal*."

Simba flipped Kambi over onto his back. "There's nothing here either," he said, examining him closely. "I've never seen a murder like this before."

"This is our fault," Nala said, looking ashamed of herself.

"What?" Simba asked, not understanding her. "How is it *our* fault?"

"This never would have happened if we hadn't snapped him out of it," Nala explained. "He would still be alive if we didn't try to question him. He would never have tried to escape. We did this. We killed him."

"We couldn't have predicted it, and that's the end of that," Simba said. He wasn't particularly concerned with the cub's death. If it was necessary to close down this camp, then so be it. "Shauri's obviously used some sort of magic to kill him. There's nothing else that would make his eyes go like that."

"Maybe he's gone to do the same thing to that other cub," Haiba theorised, prompting bemused looks from Simba and Nala.

"Huh?" they both said.

"What do you think he took that other cub for?" Haiba said. "Naptime? No. Of course not. He's going to do something to him. Probably what he did right here to Kambi. Make his eyes go all screwy."

"Like their eyes aren't screwy enough already," Nala commented, glancing across at a cub nearby who was digging a hole. "They all look like they're so far away..."

"I wish I knew where he was keeping that diamond," Simba said. "It's gotta be around here somewhere if he's using it to control all of the campers."

"We should follow Shauri," Haiba suggested. "I want to know what he's gonna do to that cub he wanted. It could be the answer to all of this. If it's not, then I will gladly stop kissing you both in your sleep."

"That's a deal," Nala said, without hesitation. She quickly walked past Haiba. "Come on. He was heading this way."

"Make sure he doesn't see you," Simba advised. "We don't know what kind of powers he has."

"And what do we do when we figure out what his plan is?" Nala asked.

"We stop him," Simba replied simply, although that wasn't much of a help to Nala. "I want this camp closed down by tomorrow morning. I said so earlier. Then we can go back home and forget all about this ugly place."

"Can't say I'd be sorry to leave the place either," Haiba said. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'd much rather be in the jungle— *Wah!*"

Haiba screamed as he fell into an unseen hole, landing with a loud clattering sound. It became clear to Simba and Nala that the hole was already filled up with something.

"Haiba?" Nala called, as she and Simba ran over to the edge of the hole. "Are you okay?"

The two cubs jumped back in alarm as Haiba quickly emerged from the hole, letting out a girly shriek of terror. "You do *not* want to fall into that hole!" he said, pointing to it with a trembling claw.

"Why?" Simba peered inside the hole, and his curious expression turned to one of slight discomfort. "Oh."

The hole was filled with skeletons. It clearly wasn't the same hole that the old camp counsellor Manna had been dragged into, because these skeletons seemed to be only recently deceased. Simba could still make out fragments of flesh and fur dangling from the various bones.

"I want a bath," Haiba said, curling up in disgust. "Manicure, pedicure, facial—the works."

"Oh, it's not that bad," Simba said. "You should consider yourself lucky that someone has taken away most of the flesh on those skeletons. Otherwise you would have fallen in a much more disgusting mess."

"Do you think Shauri killed them?" Nala asked, staring at the decaying skeletons. She sympathised with Haiba at this point...

"Possibly," Simba said. "But these aren't just cub skeletons. I can see lions, lionesses, birds... Look—there's even a couple of hyena skeletons in there. They look a little familiar, too. Probably nothing, though." He stared off into the distance. "Now I *really* want to know what's going on."

"Hmm..." Nala followed his gaze, and noticed something. "Has anyone noticed that the dirt just seems to stop over there?"

"What?" Simba narrowed his eyes, trying to see what she was referring to. "Oh, yeah. Looks like the edge of a cliff or something. Maybe that's where Shauri is keeping more of his victims."

He moved in the direction of the supposed cliff, closely followed by Nala and a very sickened Haiba. "I'm gonna have nightmares about those skeletons..." he muttered. "I'm sure of it."

"Hey, you're the one who went after Tama's killer," Simba retorted. "You should be used to seeing dead animals by now. I know I am."

"I can see that," Haiba mumbled, thinking of how much Simba had changed over the course of the past few weeks. He had become so... dark. Even the Hermit of Hekima had given up all hope on him.

The three cubs eventually arrived at the edge of the cliff. Their eyes all widened in realisation.

"Oh..." said Simba. "So it's *not* a cliff."

"It's a hole," Nala said.

Simba, Nala and Haiba were all stood right at the edge of an enormous hole. It had to be at least one mile in diameter. They were amazed that such a thing could ever be dug out. It probably took weeks. Maybe even *months*.

"Look..." Haiba pointed to something in the centre of the hole. "It's Shauri."

The camp counsellor was stood in the centre of the hole, staring down at the cub who he had asked for help. It looked as though he was just speaking to him at the moment. Nothing that the three cubs would count as malicious.

"What is he doing?" Nala asked. "I can't quite see properly from here."

"Then we have to get in there," Simba said. "Without him seeing us."

"But it's all out in the open," Haiba pointed out. "He'll be able to see us from *here* if he looks up."

"Which is why we should sneak up on him from behind," Simba told them. "Come on—before he spots us."

The three cubs quickly began to move, careful not to attract the attention of Shauri down below. His attention seemed to be focused solely on the cub, so for the moment, they were okay.

After what seemed like an eternity later, Simba, Nala and Haiba finally reached the opposite side of the mammoth hole. Shauri was clearly saying something to the cub, but he was still out of earshot for them.

"This is so annoying," Simba said, gritting his teeth. "We're gonna have to sneak up on him if we want to know what he's up to."

"But what if he sees us?" Nala said worriedly. "You saw what he did to Kambi."

"We can defend ourselves," Simba responded. "I know it's a risk, but what other option do we have? And look..." He pointed at something in the hole. "There's a large rock over there. If we can hide behind that, then he won't know a thing."

"Good idea," Haiba agreed.

"I'll go first." Simba started to ease himself down the hole, sliding silently down the incline until he reached the bottom. He gestured to Nala and Haiba, signalling that it was safe to come down.

The two soon followed, fearing that the tiniest movement could arouse Shauri's suspicions. They didn't know the full extent of his powers yet; he could cook them alive just with the power of sight.

The three cubs crept over to the large rock that Simba had pointed out, ducking beneath it so Shauri would stand no chance of spotting them from his current position.

"Phew," Haiba whispered, relieved. "I was worried for a second, there."

"Let's just listen in on him," Simba said, poking his head just around the side of the rock.

They could hear Shauri clearly now. He was still speaking in the same odd-sounding voice to the hypnotised cub.

"They're making this too easy," he said to the cub. "They do as I say, and I get to keep taking one more every night. Their parents will never find out—they just think it's a summer of fun." The evil counsellor chuckled to himself. "Soon, you'll be disappearing too, little dude."

"Take one more?" Nala said. "What does that mean, 'take one more'?"

"I don't know," Simba said, still watching Shauri intently. He had a feeling that the counsellor's plan was about to be revealed...

"Are you happy, little dude?" Shauri asked the cub. "Are you happy for me to, like, *consume* your being? It would be, like, so radical."

"You may do anything, master," the cub said. "I am your willing servant."

"Right on!" exclaimed Shauri. "This is totally tubular!"

"He's going to kill him," Nala said hurriedly, a concerned expression on her face. "We have to do something."

"All right," Simba said, stepping out from the rock.

"Simba!" Nala cried out in surprise. "What are you—?"

"Shauri!" Simba cut Nala off by yelling at the counsellor. "You leave him alone!"

The camp counsellor whipped round upon hearing Simba's voice. "Whoa, little dude—what the heck are *you* doing here?"

"Don't play dumb with me," Simba said, frowning. "I want you to tell me why you killed that cub earlier. What did he do?"

Shauri stared into the cub's auburn eyes for a few seconds, and it looked as though he was going to continue with his happy charade.

But then he started laughing.

Nala and Haiba stepped out from the rock, sharing worried glances with each other. They didn't like the sound of this...

"You don't understand anything, little dude," Shauri told him. "You're here to dig. So you can grow stronger. So *I* can grow stronger."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Simba demanded. "I know you're using the Uchoyo Diamond to hypnotise these cubs."

"Oh—so *that's* what it's called!" exclaimed Shauri. "I just thought you idiots were attracted to shiny things. These cubs have been doing everything I tell them to for weeks now. All for the good of my strength."

"What do you do with them?" Simba questioned. "Kambi's eyes were blank. What caused that?"

"*I* caused that, little dude," Shauri said, his voice becoming distorted. Simba stumbled backwards, startled. "Because I *need* them."

Simba backed up against Nala and Haiba, watching as Shauri cackled evilly into the sky. The camp counsellor reached up to his neck with both forepaws, and began to tug away at the skin on the back of his head.

Horrifically, they could only watch as Shauri ripped his face clean off, chunks of flesh falling to the ground. It was revealed that his lion body was nothing more than a mere skin. A shell.

Something far worse emerged from the skin. It was green and disgusting, taking on a slim blob-like appearance. Several long, sharp claws extended from its skinny arms. Bright, bulging blue orbs glared at them. They had to be its eyes.

They were staring at a monster.

"What are you?" Simba managed to ask, stunned by the sight. He'd never seen something so monstrous before.

"I am the Thief," it said, in a distorted, gurgling voice. With every word it spoke, it spat out thick, ugly blue globules of saliva. "I steal your souls."

"You steal souls?" Simba asked. "Why?"

"To make myself stronger," said the Thief. It grinned, revealing several rows of sharp, jagged teeth. "First I just ate some animals around here, burying their bones in the dirt. But then I discovered the true extent of my powers. I learned that I could devour entire souls. It satisfies my hunger."

"Why have the cubs dig?" said Simba. "What are you looking for?"

The Thief let out a cruel, high-pitched laugh. Nala frowned in disgust as a glob of saliva splattered to the ground right in front of her.

"I am digging for nothing!" the Thief told him. "It is just to keep them occupied. I consume one soul every night. Until all the campers are gone. Then the next summer comes around, and the whole thing starts all over again."

"How do you take the souls?" Haiba asked, staring at the horrid creature. "That cub—his eyes were blank."

"One look into their eyes," the Thief said. "Once I catch their stare, there is nothing they can do to resist. Their souls are instantly consumed."

"Where the heck do you come from?" Simba asked. He was unable to believe that such a monstrous creature could originate anywhere from earth.

"I am the last of my kind," the Thief said. "I have been lying dormant in hibernation for thousands of years. I washed up on the sea, thousands of miles away. I clawed my way here, and I created this disguise so I could fool those pathetic cubs. And once I have consumed enough souls, I will become the most powerful creature in the world!" He pointed a claw in their direction. "You three will become my next victims!"

"I don't think so," Simba said. "You're not taking our souls. I won't allow it."

"You have no say in the matter," said the Thief.

And his gaze suddenly fell upon Nala.

Simba turned around to face her. "Nala?" But she didn't respond. "Nala?"

From the moment the Thief had fixed his gaze upon her, Nala couldn't look away. She could only stare into his eyes... transfixed.

The Thief grinned widely as a torrent of green energy shot out from Nala's chest and into his. He laughed victoriously. "I can feel it! The power! I am absorbing every core of her being! *Every single aspect!*"

"Nala, come on! Wake up!" Simba was yelling at her, but she was completely entranced by the creature. He could only watch helplessly as her soul was sucked up by the Thief. "Oh, no..."

"This is bad," Haiba said, backing away slowly. "This is very, very bad."

Suddenly, he tripped over something on the ground. "Ow!" Haiba frowned as he unearthed something buried in the dirt.

And found himself staring at a Uchoyo Diamond.

"Oh, wow..." he said. He glanced at Nala, and then at the Thief. A plan slowly began to develop in his head... "Simba! Catch!"

"Huh?" Simba as Haiba threw the Uchoyo Diamond towards him. He caught the magical object, staring at it in confusion. "What do you want me to do with this?"

"Use it on him!" Haiba said. "You'll control him!"

Realisation dawned on him. "Oh, yeah."

Simba turned to the Thief, holding the Uchoyo Diamond up high. "Hey! Thief! Get a load of this!"

Moonlight bounced off the diamond, causing it to take on an incredibly shiny appearance. As soon as the Thief caught a glimpse of the object, it was completely mesmerised.

"Pretty, pretty. Shiny, shiny," said the Thief, a dopey smile on its ugly face and red spirals in its bulgy eyes. The green energy connecting him and Nala soon faded away. She coughed, falling onto her back, weakened.

Haiba caught her. "Are you okay?"

Nala nodded wearily. "I think so."

"Pretty, pretty. Shiny, shiny." The Thief couldn't look away from the Uchoyo Diamond. He was completely under Simba's control.

"Very good, Thief," said Simba, smiling widely. "Now, I want you to consume yourself. You will never bother anyone ever again."

"Yes, master," the Thief obeyed. "I will consume myself."

Simba's eyes took on a cold appearance. "Good."

And the Thief exploded.

Splat!

Blue and green blobs splattered all over the three cubs, covering them from head to toe in the disgusting remains of the Thief.

"Eww!" Nala cried, trying to shake some of the remains away. "That is so gross!"

"You know what I said about the manicure, the pedicure and the facial?" asked Haiba. "Well, I think we *all* need one now."

"Who cares?" Simba interjected. "Shauri—or the Thief—is dead. We did it. We've closed down the camp again!"

"Lucky we found that Uchoyo Diamond," Haiba said. "I guess there must be a few of them buried here."

"Hey, excuse me," said a voice. "Do you know what's happened around here?"

Simba, Nala and Haiba turned to face the cub, who had clearly been freed from the trance of the Uchoyo Diamond.

"Hmm..." Simba frowned. "I think we have a bit of clearing up to do."

It was late the next night when Simba, Nala and Haiba finally found their way back to Jowai Resort. They could hear some light snoring echoing throughout the place. Clearly Zazu and Sarafina were fast asleep.

"Well, that was a rewarding experience," Nala said. "We managed to get rid of an ugly monster *and* save all those cubs. Their parents will be pleased to see them again."

"Except for Kambi," Haiba said, frowning. "He won't be going back to his parents."

"Forget about him," Simba said sternly. "We saved everyone else. That's what matters."

"Well..." Haiba stretched out his forepaws and allowed a yawn to escape his throat. "I don't know about you guys, but I need some sleep. There's a vine hammock over there with my name on it." He waved at them before walking off.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Haiba," Simba and Nala said.

"You know," Nala said, as she and Simba found a spot beneath a tree to sleep beside, "I enjoyed that."

"You *enjoyed* it?" Simba said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Nala said, nodding. "Well, aside from almost having my soul sucked out—but you get what I mean. It was... fun. Reminded me of the old adventures we used to go on. Haiba did a good thing after all by dragging us out there, huh?"

Simba shrugged, and smiled at her. "I suppose so," he agreed. "It was more enjoyable than anything else I've done recently." He rolled over onto his side and closed his eyes.

"Simba?"

Simba opened his eyes to look at her. "What?"

And Nala kissed him on the muzzle.

"That was for saving me."

They stared into each other's eyes, feeling something for each other that they hadn't felt in a long while.

Love.

"Goodnight, Simba," Nala said.

"Goodnight, Nala," said Simba.

The two cubs closed their eyes and snuggled up to each other.

And, for the first time since the Pride Lands had been destroyed, they slept soundly.

The End

AN: What's this, you may ask? Another happy ending? Well, yes. How else did you think this story was going to end? I hope you enjoyed the reveal of who Shauri really was. All surfer dudes are really soul-sucking monsters. You should know that by now.

And so, we come to what we've all been waiting for. The final three stories make up the series finale. This is it, folks. Say your prayers and clutch your tissues, because it's the beginning of the end. See you in *The Message*!

NEXT TIME: The Interceptor bursts into the resort with a shocking message...